



A History of the Guthrie Theater

The Guthrie Theater opened on May 7, 1963, with a production of *Hamlet* directed by Sir Tyrone Guthrie, the theater's founder. The idea of the theater began in 1959 during a series of conversations among Guthrie and two colleagues – Oliver Rea and Peter Zeisler – who were disenchanted with Broadway. They wanted to create a theater with a resident acting company that would perform the classics in rotating repertory with the highest professional standards.

The Guthrie became a prototype for an important new kind of theater in contrast to the commercial environment of Broadway. There, the high costs associated with mounting a production increasingly mandated that shows must be immediately successful at high ticket prices. The Broadway atmosphere was conducive neither to producing the great works of literature, nor to cultivating the artists' talents, nor to nourishing the audience.

The idea of a major resident theater was introduced to the American public in a small paragraph on the drama page of *The New York Times* on September 30, 1959, which invited cities to indicate interest in Tyrone Guthrie's idea. Seven cities responded: Waltham, Mass., Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, San Francisco and Minneapolis/St. Paul (which was not only interested but eager). Guthrie, Rea and Zeisler visited the seven cities, but were drawn to Minneapolis/St. Paul because of its location in the heartland of America, the vitality of the cultural community, the presence of a large state university and many small colleges, and the enthusiasm shown by the Upper Midwest for the new theater project.

In 1960, a steering committee that had been formed to bring the theater to the Twin Cities obtained from the T.B. Walker Foundation a commitment: to donate the land behind the Walker Art Center for a building and to contribute \$400,000 for construction. The steering committee itself agreed to raise at least \$900,000 from the community. Thus, the Guthrie Theater was born in Minneapolis/St. Paul, symbolizing for many the birth of the not-for-profit resident theater movement.

The steering committee was constituted formally as the Tyrone Guthrie Theater Foundation in the summer of 1960. (The committee consisted of H. Harvard Arnason, Pierce Butler III, John Cowles, Jr., Roger Kennedy, Otto Silha, Philip von Blon, Frank Whiting and Louis Zelle). With the help of hundreds of dedicated volunteers, a massive statewide fundraising effort was launched and more than \$2.2 million was raised. The new theater was completed in 1963. It was planned by architect Ralph Rapson and included a 1,441-seat thrust stage designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch. The stage area was a seven-sided asymmetrical platform about 32 x 35 feet, raised three steps above floor level. A professional company composed of stage veterans Hume Cronyn, Jessica Tandy and Zoe Caldwell and young actors such as George Grizzard, Ellen Geer and Joan van Ark performed in the inaugural season.

With support from the McKnight Foundation, the Guthrie and the University of Minnesota undertook a model program for engaging graduate students in the theater arts as interns in acting, directing, design, playwriting and management. Following the 10 years of McKnight Foundation funding, the Bush Foundation took over for an additional five years.

The theater opened with 22,000 season ticket holders and \$300,000 in advance sales for its first May-September season of four plays. The Ford Foundation provided funds to offset operating losses for the first six years.

Sir Tyrone Guthrie was the artistic director from 1963 through 1966 and thereafter returned to direct each year until 1969. He passed away in 1971. In these beginning years, epic productions included *Henry V*, *St. Joan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Three Sisters*. Tyrone Guthrie's 1968 production of *The House of Atreus* brought the Theater renewed honor and attention. In 1968, the Guthrie became the first resident theater to undertake a national tour, taking *The House of Atreus* and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* to theaters in New York and Los Angeles.

In 1966 Guthrie's protégé, actor/director Douglas Campbell, took over as artistic director. Oliver Rea, who had shared administrative responsibilities at the theater, resigned the same year, leaving Peter Zeisler the sole managing director. When Campbell left in 1967, Zeisler emerged as the single leader of the Theater and hired two producing directors to work under him: Edward Payson Call and Mel Shapiro. There would be no artistic director until 1971. When Zeisler left in 1969, Donald Schoenbaum was appointed managing director, a position he held until 1986.

In 1968 the Guthrie began presenting work on smaller stages, a tradition that has continued and evolved through the years. It staged *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Tango* and *Enrico IV* in a 1968 spring season at the 500-seat Crawford Livingston Theater in St. Paul. This was followed by a two-play season in 1969. The effort ended in 1971.

In addition, the Guthrie presented three seasons (1968-71) at The Other Place, a 200-seat theater just two blocks away from the mainstage. The Other Place was an alternative theater that experimented with new plays and methods of production. Plays included *Red Cross* by Sam Shepard, *Little Murders* by Jules Feiffer, *Silence and Landscape* by Harold Pinter and *Winners* by Brian Friel. It proved to be an unqualified success for artists and audiences but added to the theater's financial burden.

In the late 1960s the Walker Art Center needed to rebuild. That gave the Guthrie the opportunity to construct those areas lost to cost cuts in the original construction - rehearsal space, a set shop and administrative offices. The Guthrie received \$1 million of the \$6.3 million raised in the Walker/Guthrie Fund Drive. When the new facility opened in 1970, the two organizations shared an entrance and common lobby.

However, in 1969 the Theater began to face problems. The original company had left, there were no plans for artistic succession and play selection lacked direction. Attendance fell sharply, earnings at the box office diminished and deficits began to accumulate. In retrospect, the Guthrie had not taken the opportunity of its first six years to build for the future. The funds provided by the Ford Foundation would not last forever, yet no substitute had been developed.

As a result, the Theater's financial problems were quite serious when Michael Langham became artistic director in 1971. A friend and respected colleague of Tyrone Guthrie, Langham came to the Guthrie after 12 years as artistic director of Canada's Stratford Festival Theatre and a distinguished career in England directing for the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre of Great Britain, and on Broadway with *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. The board of directors had to decide in February of Langham's first few months whether to approve his proposal for an ambitious first season or to postpone it for a length of time. The board gave Langham the green light and resolved to secure the Theater's financial future. Langham recruited leading actors with whom he had worked for his inaugural plays, *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, both of which were artistic and box office successes.

The Langham years, 1971-77, were marked by deft stagings of familiar classics that enjoyed broad appeal. A central core of actors performed works including *Oedipus the King*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, *The Matchmaker*, *She Stoops to Conquer* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The season was expanded gradually, reaching 42 weeks in 1975.

The extended seasons produced the earned income required to maintain the organization and to provide for artistic growth. The board of directors required the Guthrie to "earn" 70 percent of its budget, though the national average was 50 percent. Throughout the 1970s the theater prided itself on ending each year free of deficit.

The touring program grew during this period as well. From a modest tour of *Fables Here and Now* in 1971, outreach programs grew through the 1970s and productions toured the Upper Midwest. In the 1980s, national tours reached new audiences and earned additional income.

In 1972, the Guthrie received a substantial grant from the Ford Foundation. The grant created a working capital reserve to alleviate seasonal cash flow problems, stimulate local fundraising and ensure the organization's fiscal integrity.

When The Other Place was torn down for urban renewal, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to Michael Langham for another theater - Guthrie 2, located on Washington Avenue near the University of Minnesota. Using the resources of the Guthrie to encourage new writers and explore alternative production methods, Guthrie 2 helped the Guthrie fulfill its responsibility to the ongoing development of its artists and to the American theater. Audiences saw mainstage actors perform plays by Emily Mann, David Mamet and Mark Medoff. The Guthrie 2 program continued until 1978.

In 1976 the board and staff undertook a \$7.5 million endowment drive, but only \$4.5 million was raised. Corporations and foundations gave the first eight major gifts, totaling \$2.65 million. The eight gifts were given by Dayton-Hudson Foundation, General Mills Foundation, Honeywell Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, *The Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, The National Endowment for the Arts, The Pillsbury Foundation, and the St. Paul Companies. The largest gift from an individual was \$54,000.

When Langham left in 1977, the board ventured in a new direction. After years of British artistic leadership (Guthrie was Irish, Langham was English), the board appointed Alvin Epstein, the first American artistic director. Epstein had worked as an actor and director primarily at the Yale Repertory Theatre. During his 18-month tenure, he introduced many new programs and ideas to Guthrie audiences including two new plays, *Teibele and Her Demon* by Isaac Bashevis Singer and *Bonjour, La, Bonjour* by Michael Tremblay. He arranged for the renowned Russian director Anatoly Efros to visit from Moscow and direct *Marriage* and *Monsieur de Molière*.

In 1980, an international search for Epstein's successor resulted in the appointment of Liviu Ciulei, former artistic director of the Bulandra Theatre in Romania. Ciulei, described by *Newsweek* as "one of the boldest and most challenging figures on the international scene" was known for his uniquely physical and daring theatrical interpretations. A world-class director, designer and architect, Ciulei began by redesigning the stage. The acting platform was modified so its size, shape and height were adjustable, thereby allowing stage designers greater freedom. Ciulei adjusted the stage to be more rectangular, and he opened up the backstage in order to create greater depth. The adjustable features of the stage include the moat (the area surrounding the stage which has screw jacks to adjust its height), the booking accordion walls, and the use of interchangeable floor panels - allowing the stage surface to be redefined and reshaped for each production. Ciulei's acclaimed production of *The Tempest*, which he had originally staged at the Bulandra, opened his inaugural season.

His great interest in reinterpreting the classics was strongly influenced by Guthrie's *Hamlet*, which he had seen in 1963. Ciulei's style was highly contemporary and international. He invited distinguished directors including Andrei Serban, Lucian Pintilie and Richard Foreman to reinterpret the classics.

In 1982 the Guthrie Theater received a Tony Award for its outstanding contribution to the American theater. During Ciulei's years, continuous favorable national and international attention was focused on the theater. Audiences saw *Peer Gynt*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Candide*, *The Seagull* and *Tartuffe*, to name only a few of the most nationally acclaimed productions.

In 1981, the theater recognized that the current endowment would not generate enough income to meet its artistic needs. The Guthrie incurred a deficit of \$630,000 in fiscal year 1983, depleting the working capital reserves created by the Ford Foundation. In order to strengthen the financial base and prepare the way for an endowment campaign, an effort was launched to expand the annual fundraising campaign. The number of contributors would grow from 3,000 in 1981 to 12,000 in 1986.

Throughout his tenure, Ciulei struggled with two major frustrations. He felt it was essential to have a second space to explore new work, create new plays and present lesser-known plays by well-established writers or important classical works whose scale of production was inappropriate for the mainstage. He wanted to construct a small, well-equipped theater on the mainstage site. Second, Ciulei did not achieve his dream of creating an acting ensemble until his final season, when the Theater returned to playing in rotating repertory – a tradition departed from two seasons earlier, primarily for financial reasons.

After Ciulei's resignation in 1985, the board concluded that the next artistic director should be the single head or C.E.O. of the organization, responsible for all of its operations, and again launched an international search. The board wanted to choose an artistic director committed to a resident acting company, to the classical repertory and with a vision for the Guthrie as a leader in American theater. On June 1, 1986, Garland Wright became the sixth artistic director of the Guthrie Theater.

Wright had previously served as associate artistic director to Liviu Ciulei from 1980–83 and had been an artistic associate for Washington D.C.'s Arena Stage from 1985–86. Wright selected Edward A. Martenson, former theater program director for the National Endowment for the Arts and managing director for the Yale Repertory Theatre, to serve as executive director in charge of the administration of the Guthrie.

In January 1987, the board of directors adopted a Long Range Plan, simultaneously launching an ambitious program of artistic development and the \$25 million Campaign for Artistic Excellence. The Plan has proven a reliable guide to the Guthrie's progress.

The establishment of the resident acting company, consistently high levels of production quality and the return of a strong and increasingly loyal audience were the most visible accomplishments of this period. Among the more memorable productions were *The Misanthrope*, *Leon & Lena (and Ienz)*, *Richard III*, *The Wild Duck*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Screens*, a trilogy of *Richard II*, *Henry IV (parts I and II)* and *Henry V*, *Medea* and *As You Like It*.

Wright was also committed to the idea of a second performing space, and created the Guthrie Laboratory located at 700 North First Street in the Minneapolis Warehouse District. The Laboratory was established to provide a facility to explore and develop new work and performance techniques with the purpose of enhancing the actors' skills. Actors, writers, directors, teachers and scholars collaborated to explore new ideas, ways of performing and to create new works.

The works performed at the Lab during Garland Wright's tenure were most often a demonstration of a process rather than finished products. Wright wanted a place to seek new questions about "our art, ourselves, and the nature of communicating." Wright also developed the Guthrie's two-year resident director program, which recognized the need to develop and encourage directors at the beginning of their careers. In the second year of the program, the resident director would direct a classical project produced in the Laboratory. In addition, Wright continued developing new ways to reach out to the young audiences by instilling the theatergoing habit in students, heightening the understanding of theater among high school and college level instructors, providing a multi-level program of continuing education for the general audience. He maintained Tyrone Guthrie's dream of establishing a theater with a resident acting company performing plays that illuminate the timeless themes found in the world's great literature for today's audience in rotating repertory.

In February 1992, the Guthrie successfully completed its five-year Campaign for Artistic Excellence, receiving \$26,114,345 in pledges, a record for any American theater at that time. The extraordinary feat was accomplished through the unprecedented participation of an astonishing 4,519 individual contributors. For the first time in any Guthrie campaign, more dollars were pledged by individuals than corporations.

The following February the Guthrie received a long-awaited facelift, which took four months to complete. The renovation was a \$3.5 million project, made possible through generous gifts to the Guthrie Theater's Campaign for Artistic Excellence. Modifications included better acoustics, new wheelchair accessible seating with accommodations for 15 wheelchairs, improved shielding of theater lighting, flexibility for "flying" props,

general refurbishing and the re-upholstery of the seats (keeping the “confetti” color scheme). Lobby renovations increased quality and comfort: an expanded women’s restroom, redesigned food and beverage outlets, a lobby expansion which added eight feet out toward Vineland Place, and a new energy-efficient glass curtain wall. Within the theater there were 1,298 seats surrounding the stage in a 180-degree arc. In order to maintain the intimacy between the actor and audience, which Guthrie believed important, no seat was more than 15 rows or 52 feet away from the stage (the distance from a pitcher’s mound to home plate is 60 feet, six inches).

After Garland Wright announced his resignation in 1994, a search for his successor began. In February 1995, the Guthrie’s board of directors named Joe Dowling the Guthrie’s seventh artistic director. Dowling is an internationally-known director and had long been associated with the Abbey Theatre, Ireland’s national theater. While an acting student, he joined the Abbey’s acting company and later founded the first Irish theater-in-education group, the Young Abbey. In 1974 he was named artistic director of the Peacock Theatre, the Abbey’s second stage.

In 1978, at age 29 Dowling became the youngest artistic director in the Abbey’s history, beginning a seven-year term that brought about an artistic and institutional resurgence. He was particularly noted for encouraging the development of new plays and young playwrights as well as working with many distinguished writers including Brian Friel, Hugh Leonard and Frank McGuiness. After leaving the Abbey in 1985, Dowling was the managing and artistic director of Dublin’s oldest commercial theater, the Gaiety, where he founded and directed the Gaiety School of Acting, now widely regarded as Ireland’s premier drama school. Since 1990 he has directed extensively in North America, with productions at Arena Stage, Long Wharf Theatre, The Public Theater, the Stratford Theatre Festival and The Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C.

Executive Director Edward Martenson departed the Guthrie in the spring of 1996, and Dowling appointed David Hawkanson as managing director of the Theater. Hawkanson came to the Guthrie having served in many arts management arenas including work as a consultant for the National Arts Stabilization Project and as managing director of Hartford Stage Company.

Joe Dowling’s inaugural season included *The Cherry Orchard*, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (written by Brian Friel shortly after returning home to Ireland after a period spent in Minneapolis in 1963 observing Sir Tyrone Guthrie launch the Theater’s first season) and Dowling’s signature production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Like many of his predecessors, Dowling felt the Guthrie needed to have a second space to present plays to complement the mainstage programming and introduce new work. The Guthrie Laboratory, now called the Guthrie Lab, became the site for seasons of fully-produced plays, including three in his inaugural season, Sam Shepard’s *Simpatico*, Manuel Puig’s *Mystery of the Rose Bouquet* and Femi Osofisan’s *Many Colors Make the Thunder-King*. Programming at the Lab continued through 2006, featuring works by contemporary playwrights such as Arthur Miller, Suzan-Lori Parks, John Guare, Warren Leight, Jane Martin and Julie Marie Myatt.

Among the notable achievements of Dowling’s leadership was the establishment of two actor training programs. Dowling created a company development department, headed by Kenneth Washington, to develop and oversee programs designed to nurture relationships with young actors. In 1997 the department launched A Guthrie Experience for Actors in Training, whose purpose is to introduce actors to the Guthrie and the Twin Cities and to help build a bridge between training and the profession. The annual program invites a dozen actors from advanced actor training programs to spend the summer before their final year of training to the Guthrie, hoping to retain a relationship with these young artists as they launch their professional careers. And in 2000, the Guthrie partnered with the University of Minnesota to form a B.F.A. program through the College of Liberal Arts within the Theatre Arts Department that provides a conservatory actor training experience within a liberal arts setting. This undergraduate training program has graduated a class of young actor-scholars every year since 2004.

Dowling also forged new and lasting relationships with living playwrights over his tenure, and the Guthrie produced a number of world premiere productions, including *Resurrection Blues* by Arthur Miller, *His Girl Friday* by John Guare, *The Great Gatsby* adapted by Simon Levy, *The Falls* by Jeffrey Hatcher, *Boats on a River* by

Julie Marie Myatt, *After a Hundred Years* by Naomi Iizuka, *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures* by Tony Kushner, *Appomattox* by Christopher Hampton and *Nice Fish* by Mark Rylance and Louis Jenkins.

The Guthrie has always been committed to bringing our audiences theatrical experiences from around the globe and in 2001 this commitment was reinvigorated by the creation of the WorldStage Series, which has introduced Minnesota audiences to acclaimed, innovative and socially diverse theater companies from countries including Belgium, Poland, Ireland and the U.K.

The Guthrie Theater also returned to regional touring for a few seasons during Dowling's tenure, with the launch of a regional tour of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2000, followed in subsequent years by *Molly Sweeney*, *Ah, Wilderness!*, *The Stuff of Dreams*, *Freezing Paradise* and a national tour of *Othello*. More recently, the Guthrie has partnered with New York-based The Acting Company on an annual national tour, beginning with *Henry V* in 2009. Many graduates of the B.F.A. and alumni of the Guthrie Experience actor training program have been cast in these touring productions.

Early in Dowling's tenure, he realized the Guthrie was quickly outgrowing its home on Vineland Place. In addition to the Guthrie Lab in the Warehouse District, the Theater's scene shop, development department, and costume and props storage were housed in satellite buildings throughout the Twin Cities. The need for additional space and to bring all operations together in order to operate more efficiently became more pronounced, and Dowling began to execute his vision to establish the Guthrie as a national center for theater art and theater education, able to expand the range of performances and programs offered.

After discovering that expansion at the Vineland Place location was not feasible, the organization decided on a spot on the banks of the Mississippi River on the east side of downtown Minneapolis. The Guthrie on the River Capital Campaign was launched to raise \$75 million from private contributions, and a \$3 million appropriation from the State of Minnesota in 2000 allowed for architectural selection and site acquisition. On April 2, 2001, Joe Dowling announced that internationally-renowned French architect Jean Nouvel had been selected as the Design Architect for the new theater; Architectural Alliance was the local architectural partner chosen to work with Atelier Jean Nouvel. The public presentation of the new building's design was made on February 7, 2002. After gubernatorial vetoes and disappointments in obtaining additional bonding support from the state legislature in previous sessions, the Guthrie's request was finally passed at the end of the 2003 legislative session, providing \$25 million toward the new Guthrie's construction. Groundbreaking for the new structure began on September 8, 2003.

The Guthrie closed its home on Vineland Place with a performance of *Hamlet* directed by Joe Dowling, featuring in the cast four graduates of the University of Minnesota/Guthrie Theater B.F.A. Actor Training Program, including Santino Fontana in the title role, and three alumni of A Guthrie Experience for Actors in Training. The final performance at Vineland Place was May 7, 2006, 43 years to day that the building opened with Sir Tyrone Guthrie's production of *Hamlet*.

The new Guthrie Theater opened on June 25, 2006, with a community day celebration that invited the public to visit the new facility and participate in and enjoy music performances, speakers, family activities, fireworks and a dance party. This architectural gem houses three stages - a classic thrust stage for the grand-scale classics of the centuries, a proscenium stage for the more intimate classics of this century and a studio theater for developing the classics of tomorrow. It also includes production and rehearsal facilities, administrative offices, an entire floor of classrooms for the theater's ever-expanding education programs, and improved audience amenities. The total project cost was \$125 million, and the Guthrie was completed on time and on budget. The first performances in the new building included *The Great Gatsby* on the Wurtele Thrust Stage, *The Real Thing* and a WorldStage Series presentation of *DruidSynge* on the McGuire Proscenium Stage and *The Falls* in the Dowling Studio.

Recent productions range from Shakespeare to modern classics, including two theaterwide celebrations of playwrights Tony Kushner, in 2009, and Christopher Hampton, in 2012. *H.M.S. Pinafore*, which closed the 2010–2011 season, was recorded and broadcast nationally in October 2011 as part of PBS’s Arts Fall Festival. More than 30 local theater companies including Pillsbury House Theatre, Walking Shadow Theatre Company, Flying Foot Forum, Mu Performing Arts, Carlyle Brown & Company and Theater Latté Da have presented their own work in the Dowling Studio, which has also been a performance space for both of the actor training programs.

The 2014–2015 season was Joe Dowling’s final as the Guthrie’s artistic director. After an extensive search, on February 17, 2015, it was announced that Joseph Haj would become the Guthrie’s eighth artistic director on July 1, 2015. With his appointment, Haj’s professional journey comes full circle as he made his Guthrie debut as an actor during the theater’s 1989–90 season. He came to the Guthrie from PlayMakers Repertory Company, the LORT theater company in residence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he served as producing artistic director since 2006.

In 2016, under Haj’s leadership, the theater was awarded a \$1 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in support of a groundbreaking initiative for the Guthrie’s ninth floor. The initiative supports the creation of theater that wrestles with urgent questions and inspires dialogue with audiences; expand the diversity of voices, visions and styles onstage; and engages community members currently underserved by the Guthrie. To ensure access to all, the ticket price for all performances on Level Nine was set at a deeply discounted rate of \$9, and a director of community engagement was appointed to conceive, develop, implement and oversee community-based programming.

While the Guthrie Theater’s mission and artistic excellence have remained constant, much has changed over the past five decades. What began as a summer season of four productions supported by a minimal staff is now a complex organization operating year-round and employing more than 500 people per year. Forever growing and changing as the community that founded it changes, the Guthrie Theater is a living organization reflecting the culture and human spirit of its audiences today.